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Lori Cox Han

Chapman University, [lhhan@chapman.edu](mailto:lhhan@chapman.edu)

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## Public Leadership in the Political Arena

LORI COX HAN

At the end of October 2007, the raging wildfires throughout several counties in Southern California dominated national news coverage. On local television stations in the greater Los Angeles and San Diego areas, early-morning to late-night news coverage provided viewers with heart-wrenching images of thousands of people evacuating their homes, and the even more devastating images of some residents watching their homes burn to the ground. While most of the news coverage in all media outlets for several days focused mostly on the cause (drought conditions, Santa Ana winds, and arson investigations) and effect (number of homes lost and acreage burned) of the wildfires as well as the efforts to contain and extinguish the blazes (including laudatory coverage of the efforts of fire fighters and other volunteers from across the country), a fascinating subplot developed in the news coverage that focused on how California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger responded to and handled the natural disaster that had hit his state. Public officials are often judged, rightly or wrongly, on how they handle crisis situations, and this was one of those occasions for a celebrity-turned-politician who has long been accustomed to the public spotlight.

During the first few days of the devastating wildfires, Californians witnessed a take-charge and proactive governor intent on both managing and resolving the crisis. For those closely following the story, Schwarzenegger was everywhere—in Malibu where the first of the fires started, then east to Lake Arrowhead to another major fire spot, then south to Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego where evacuees found temporary shelter, then back north to

another major fire area near Santa Clarita. He held numerous press conferences throughout the various fire-ravaged counties and also hosted several big-name politicians—including President George W. Bush, Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, and U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, among others—as tour guide to the devastated areas that needed both the attention and resources that only the federal government could provide. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, Schwarzenegger “crisscross[ed] the region on foot and by air to handle the most overwhelming challenge of his administration” and served as “the optimistic and omnipresent face of the wildfire response: consoler to the evacuees, debriefer to the media, cheerleader to the firefighters and personal liaison to the federal government.”<sup>1</sup> From the fire victims to the casual observers, the public message was clear—Schwarzenegger was in charge.

Schwarzenegger’s response and its portrayal in the press in the face of natural disaster showed a dramatic contrast to how his gubernatorial colleague in Louisiana, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, had been portrayed as responding to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. While Blanco was not the only politician who received public criticism for how she handled the disaster and responded to the needs of citizens (President Bush and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin also received plenty of blame), Schwarzenegger’s response seemed to indicate that he clearly understood his public leadership role as a governor faced with a crisis. The *Washington Post* observed in an editorial that Californians had in their governor “something that Louisianans, in particular those in New Orleans, didn’t have when they needed it most: leadership.”<sup>2</sup> And as if to highlight that point, and to show that he himself had learned an important lesson from Hurricane Katrina, President Bush praised Schwarzenegger at a press conference with the governor by telling reporters, “It makes a significant difference when you have somebody in the Statehouse willing to take the lead.”

As this example illustrates, public leadership is an essential responsibility for public officials, whether they are elected or appointed to office. Emergency or disaster situations often provide the best opportunity under the worst of circumstances for public officials to demonstrate their leadership abilities, but even in nondisaster mode, public leadership—those actions by officials that citizens either see and hear or read about—is now a permanent day-to-day fixture in the job responsibilities of presidents, cabinet secretaries, governors, mayors, congressional leaders, and any number of other public officials. Obviously, presidents command more attention than any other public official and a select few have served as standard bearers for successful public leadership. Among the more prominent examples are Franklin Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats” over the radio airwaves to discuss the Great Depression with American citizens; John F. Kennedy’s televised address to the

nation in October 1962 regarding the Cuban Missile Crisis; Bill Clinton’s words of comfort and sympathy at a memorial service for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing in April 1995; and George W. Bush’s remarks at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., three days after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Presidents are often credited with finding their public voice in response to these types of events. However, it is that consistent delivery of successful public leadership that can often make or break a politician’s career; those who can regularly connect with citizens to deliver a message of strong and effective leadership often succeed where others fail in the public arena.

In this chapter, I address the concept of public leadership and the important role that it now plays in the governing process at all levels and in various branches of government. First, I offer a definition of public leadership and the various political components that encompass this aspect of governing. The vast scholarly literature that has developed in recent decades on the topic of presidential communications offers an excellent assessment of the contemporary importance of public leadership. Next, I provide a brief overview of public leadership strategies and how they have evolved over time (particularly in concurrence with technological advances in mass media), as well as relevant examples that help us to understand the significance of public leadership. Finally, I conclude with an assessment of how *public* leadership specifically has shaped the overall definition of *political* leadership and how that contributes to the dynamic of the current political environment within American government.

## DEFINING PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

The concept of leadership is a much-debated topic within several academic disciplines, including political science, psychology, philosophy, and sociology, just to name a few. No clear definition has yet to emerge, though many scholars have provided useful insights as to what makes a leader successful, as well as which leaders have failed and why. Understanding one particular aspect of leadership—the art and skill of communication, or what some refer to as public leadership—and how it fits within our general understanding of political leadership can provide a useful insight to one of the most important elements of the political and governing process in the United States. Specifically, and in its political context, public leadership can be defined simply as the ability of a public official to use the public component of a political office (whether elected or appointed) to accomplish a specific task, goal, or agenda item. As such, the end result of public leadership can be something as specific and tangible as the passage of a new law or the start of a government initiative, or something as broad based and intangible as rhetoric that motivates,

inspires, or comforts the masses. However, at either extreme, public leadership skills matter and play a large role in allowing a public official to accomplish his or her political goals.

When thinking of great leaders in American history, many prominent politicians, particularly presidents, come to mind. Political luminaries such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan are given high marks in regards to "presidential greatness."<sup>3</sup> In their roles as steward of the people, the commander in chief, and the embodiment of American strength and national unity, Americans expect their presidents to be the epitome of political leadership. Strong communication skills also go a long way in terms of how Americans rate their presidents, both while in office and while assessing their legacies as former presidents. The same can be said of other political leaders, whether state governors, prominent members of Congress, mayors, or even cabinet members or leaders within national party organizations. While the offices and jobs themselves may vary greatly, every public official faces the public's expectations regarding their job performance. In terms of public leadership, the symbolism that a particular public office represents helps to determine the expectation that those constituents have of the individual office holder. As a result, executive leadership positions such as president, governor, or mayor, often have higher public expectations than those in a legislative or bureaucratic leadership position. Those in executive positions are expected to show leadership traits as being strong, tough, and decisive, as well as being in control, while those in legislative positions or cabinet members working within the bureaucracy are expected to be more cooperative and willing to compromise to achieve results.

To paraphrase Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of obscenity, Americans know good leadership when they see it, and the act of "seeing" great leadership almost always comes through public appearances and statements (and most often as portrayed through news media coverage). However, defining an ever-changing and malleable term like "leadership," particularly within its political context, has proven to be a difficult task for those who study the topic. Various theories about leadership and how to define it have emerged that focus on specific traits, skills, styles, or personality characteristics that leaders possess, or certain situations that emerge to allow leaders to then act accordingly.<sup>4</sup> One of the most widely recognized and quoted theories of leadership comes from the work of James MacGregor Burns, who first introduced the concept of "transformational leadership" in the late 1970s.<sup>5</sup> According to Burns's definition, leadership is more than just the act of wielding power, as it involves the relationship between leaders and followers. Transactional leadership, according to Burns, refers to what most leaders are able to accomplish in their day-to-day routines. This

involves the necessary work that comes with the position and is nothing exceptional. For example, the Senate majority leader may promise that his or her party will pursue health care reform, and once the congressional session begins, the majority leader then helps to bring health care legislation to the Senate floor for debate and a vote. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, provides more than just a simple policy change or a transaction between political actors pursuing the objectives of their elected or appointed position. Instead, a transformational leader provides broader changes to the entire political system that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. Quoting Burns, "Transforming leaders define public values that embrace the supreme and enduring principles of a people."<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, political scientist Bruce Miroff argues that true political leadership must come from an honest dialogue between citizens and their leader, and the public cannot continue to be viewed through a cynical lens as "an ignorant, emotional force to be managed and manipulated."<sup>7</sup> As such, not all forms of public leadership, no matter how successful, serve the best interests of the public. Miroff's study analyzes nine specific leaders that he considers to be "icons of democracy." Democratic leaders respect their followers, are committed to the notion of self-government, and nurture the possibilities of civic engagement through a public dialogue. However, while various political leaders throughout American history have fostered the American democratic ideal, others have undermined it. According to Miroff's analysis, Alexander Hamilton, Theodore Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy represent a type of heroic leadership based on imagery where each pursued a kind of self-aggrandizement that jeopardized democratic public life. On the other hand, John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, as well as dissenting leaders such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Eugene V. Debs, and Martin Luther King Jr., sought to educate the American public and challenged "the American democracy to fulfill its deeper promise."<sup>8</sup> As Miroff states, "In an era when American leadership seems sunk in petty power struggles and shallow media spectacles, some of our icons have much to teach us about the forms of leadership that can still speak to the democratic possibilities of the American people."<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, communication skills can and do play an important role in leadership as communication is one of the most important features of distinguishing a good leader from a great one. This is a particularly salient point given the dominance of the mass media within the American political environment, a trend that only increases as newer technologies continue to emerge year after year. However, it takes more than just good communication skills, or charisma, to be a great leader. Getting back to Burns's notion of transformational leadership, charisma can be confusing, undemocratic, and at its worst,

a type of tyranny. On the positive side, however, charismatic leaders can empower their followers by providing them a clear vision, and by energizing and enabling them to achieve a greater public good.

For the past three decades, a tremendous amount of research has emerged that looks at the way leaders communicate; scholars interested in this issue have considered what leaders say and to whom, how the news media cover those public events and shape the public perception of political leaders, the reactions that come from public leadership from both citizens (public opinion) and other political actors (in accomplishing policy objectives), and the communication strategies that leaders develop. While a good part of this research has been dedicated to presidents, this area of scholarship is also quite instructive to understanding how all political actors must contend with the expectation for public leadership.

Presidential scholars first began to take notice of a president's public leadership activities during the 1950s, as television began to come of age in how it both informed and entertained the American public. Since that time, several scholarly classics have emerged that continue to animate the debate on why and how presidential leadership, including the public aspects of leadership, is such an important element of governance. Any discussion on the topic of presidential leadership must begin with the work of Richard Neustadt. For presidents in the modern era (a time frame that most scholars consider to have begun with the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933), communicating with both the public and other political participants, especially Congress, has become a key component of both effective leadership and successful policy making. Most often, the mass media provide the primary means of presidential communication. In Neustadt's classic study of the presidency, real presidential power is defined as the power to persuade, with successful presidents relying on a leadership style based on bargaining with other political actors.<sup>10</sup>

Many scholars have since further examined and some have redefined how presidential communication and public opinion can affect policy making by the president and his attempts to control the political agenda. Elmer Cornwell became one of the first scholars to discuss exerting presidential power through the use of expanding media technologies to influence public opinion. By the mid-1960s, the president had become a central focus of news from Washington, and hence began to have more power over shaping the national agenda by rapidly reaching, through both television and print, his national audience. The ability to help shape public opinion, through televised and/or highly covered speeches and press conferences, allows the president a chance to "win and channel public support" during the legislative process.<sup>11</sup> Political scientist Theodore Lowi described the modern presidency as "plebiscitary"; the president is viewed as the property of the citizenry in which the

voters invested the authority and power to govern. Presidents work hard to keep the initiative and/or control over the policy agenda coming out of the White House by personalizing the presidency. The president wants his proposals to dominate congressional debate and shape legislation; this is achieved through press conferences, speeches, appearances, and communications with Congress and other officials, all recorded by the press.<sup>12</sup> According to presidency scholar Samuel Kernell, presidents of the modern era have utilized public support by "going public," a style of presidential leadership where the president sells his programs directly to the American people. Going public is contradictory to some views of democratic theory, but is now practiced by presidents as a result of a weakened party system, split-ticket voting, divided government, increased power of interest groups, and the growth of mass communication systems.<sup>13</sup>

Whether democratic or not, there is no denying the importance of skilled communication for effective public leadership for all contemporary politicians, in particular presidents. As I have argued in other writings, developing a White House communication strategy has become an important and permanent part of the everyday operation of the White House. An effective presidential communication strategy can be a critical factor, at least for presidents since the emergence of the television age, in developing and implementing the administration's policy goals. "To understand how a president communicates is to understand an important base of power for the modern presidency."<sup>14</sup> Mary Stuckey has also aptly labeled the president an "interpreter-in-chief" and the "nation's chief storyteller." Presidential rhetoric has changed over time as media technologies have continued to expand, providing citizens with more in-depth coverage of the president. Especially because of television coverage, presidential advisers now develop communication strategies that seek more support for the president as a person or leader and less support for specific policy proposals. This has led to an emphasis on symbolic and ceremonial, rather than deliberative, speech.<sup>15</sup> These types of communication strategies have also trickled down in recent years to other political offices; the position of press secretary and/or public information officer is now essential in the offices of members of Congress, governors, and cabinet secretaries.

While much has been written about presidential communication and public leadership strategies, recent studies have suggested that perhaps even politicians who are skilled communicators do not have an easy time of influencing the public through their rhetoric or the symbolism of their offices. Several impediments exist that make the task of leading the public difficult. The growing number of media technologies, outlets, and channels make it difficult for even the president to have his voice heard among the cacophony of news anchors, political pundits, and other entertainment options. In



addition, the current divide among the electorate in which the voters are firmly grounded in their beliefs and cannot be persuaded otherwise can make attempts at presidential rhetoric futile. As presidency scholar George Edwards points out, even those presidents (and by extension other prominent politicians) who are charismatic face many obstacles and are frustrated in their attempts to lead the public, even though the "American political system provides presidents with strong incentives to increase their persuasive resources by seeking public support." Edwards's research suggests that rarely are presidents capable of changing public opinion on an issue and their attempts to lead the public fall on "deaf ears." However, they persist in pursuing public strategies due to the routines of politics (going public is a presidential act; therefore presidents continue with the tradition); the need to preach to the converted (maintaining preexisting support in the face of opposition to policy changes); and influencing elites (while voters themselves may not change their attitudes through presidential rhetoric, the elite debate among journalists and other policy makers may be influenced).<sup>16</sup>

Other recent studies have also begun to question the going public model in terms of its effectiveness and usefulness for governance. Political scientist Matthew Eshbaugh-Soha argues that it is Congress and the bureaucracy, not the public, to which presidents direct their public speeches in an attempt to influence legislation and implement public policy. In addition to going public, presidents also "signal" members of Congress and the bureaucracy to gain support for their policy initiatives. While signaling is "a mixed source of power for modern presidents because signals are not always effective, nor do they guarantee presidential influence," it can nonetheless be effective in certain policy areas, and signaling effects "are direct and do not require public involvement."<sup>17</sup> Presidents have also received much criticism of late for their willingness to "pander" to public opinion in terms of choosing which public policies to support and for adopting a model of governing that resembles a "permanent campaign."<sup>18</sup> Political scientist Brandice Canes-Wrone argues that while presidents do appear to sometimes pander to public opinion, they do so to maximize their influence over Congress and the public (who can be motivated to influence Congress to support the president) to push through legislation that is already generally supported by the public: "When Congress is likely to reject a popular executive proposal, a president may appeal to the public about his position and thereby pressure members to enact it. Moreover, mass opinion can affect a president's likelihood of supporting an initiative."<sup>19</sup> Presidency scholar Colleen Shogan also argues that "rhetorical leadership in the presidency is not limited to moving public opinion polls," as it can also have an important moral message and "send signals to Congress, contribute vital public support to a burgeoning social movement, make important connections between policy decisions and ethical

concerns, enhance their constitutional role, oppose political adversaries, or engage in party leadership."<sup>20</sup>

These studies, of course, shift the debate of Kernell's going public model. The technological developments of the mass media in recent years have allowed presidents to go public more often, and with much greater ease. Yet, going public does not necessarily translate into greater success with efforts at public leadership. Strategy matters in this regard, and only in some cases can a president (or other politicians as well) have success at gaining the support of both the public and other relevant actors in the policy-making process to enact some sort of tangible change. Those who hold public office do not have the luxury of acting unilaterally in accomplishing their goals, and depending on the circumstances and the mood of the public, must appeal to other politicians, the public, the news media, or any combination of those three to succeed in their efforts of public leadership. Edwards suggests that one strategic option for presidents may be to "stay private" as opposed to "go public," since political leaders often frustrate the necessary process of building coalitions to accomplish a policy objective by taking their cases directly to the public:

Such [public] positions are difficult to compromise, and there is less emphasis on providing benefits for both sides, allowing many to share in a coalition's success and to declare victory. . . . Staying private is likely to contribute to reducing gridlock, incivility, and, thus, public cynicism and deserves a more prominent role in the president's strategic arsenal.<sup>21</sup>

However, given the tendency for recent presidents and other political actors to go public, whether or not they happen to be good at it, it is not now likely for a president to back away from that strategy given the institutional and political expectations for it to occur.

## PUBLIC LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES

Public leadership and the development of necessary strategies in this regard have had important historical developments, particularly during the twentieth century. The proliferation of daily newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century, followed by the advent of radio, then television, and then the expansion of newer technologies like the Internet and satellite transmissions, have created myriad opportunities for politicians at all levels of government to communicate. Particularly for presidents, along with the opportunities to communicate came the expectation that the president would be an effective communicator, using the bully pulpit to rally for public policies and to share his vision for America with his fellow citizens. The start of the rhetorical presidency and the president's use of the bully pulpit are

credited to Theodore Roosevelt because he advanced the president's role as the national leader of public opinion and used his rhetorical skills to increase the power of the presidency through popular support. However, since that time, several presidents have received less than stellar marks for their public speaking skills and their ability to lead and inspire the public as the ultimate symbol of American political power.

During his time in the White House (1901–1909), Roosevelt was able to recast the public role of the presidency and add to the aura if not power of the office. Roosevelt believed that the president was the steward of the people and that weak presidential leadership during the nineteenth century had left the American system of government open to the harmful influence of special interests. As a result, he expanded presidential power to the furthest limits of the Constitution by drawing on broad discretionary powers, and he utilized the public component of the office to gain support of his legislative agenda in an attempt to place public pressure on Congress. Roosevelt's "Stewardship Doctrine" demanded presidential reliance on popular support of the people, and also increased the public's expectation of the man and the office. Roosevelt's use of the presidency as a bully pulpit changed America's view of the office and helped to shift power from the legislative to the executive branch during the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Later presidents, though not all, would follow Roosevelt's strategy of relying on the bully pulpit to elevate the power of the office by serving as the spokesperson for the American public. Woodrow Wilson (1913–1921) also relied on the bully pulpit and broke with a 113-year tradition by becoming the first president since John Adams to deliver his State of the Union address in person before the Congress in 1913. Through his rhetorical skills, especially during World War I, Wilson established the presidency as a strong position of leadership at both the national and international levels. Franklin D. Roosevelt relied heavily on the bully pulpit, particularly his use of radio, to gradually persuade the American public to support his New Deal policies during the 1930s and America's involvement in World War II during the 1940s. With the start of the television age in the 1950s, the use of the presidential bully pulpit became even more important as a president's overall success or failure as a leader could more easily be judged based on his rhetorical skills and public influence. Since the 1950s, three presidents stand out as successful in their use of the bully pulpit—John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. As we will discuss below, all were known for their frequent use of inspiring and eloquent speeches about public policy and their visions for the country. Other presidents during the twentieth century either abdicated the bully pulpit or used it ineffectively, which diminished their leadership potential by allowing other political actors to shape the public debate.

As it has evolved during the past century, a president's skillful use of the bully pulpit is necessary to promote his philosophy for governing as well as the overall moral and political vision of the administration. It can also determine the effectiveness of presidential governance and whether or not a president can accomplish his policy and broader ideological objectives through rhetorical skills. However, some view this as an institutional dilemma for the modern presidency. Since the current political culture now demands the president to be a popular leader by fulfilling popular functions and serving the nation through mass appeal, this suggests that the presidency has greatly deviated from the original constitutional intentions of the founders. Some scholars have argued that the rhetorical presidency is a danger to the American constitutional democracy. According to political scientist Jeffrey Tulis, the Framers were quite suspicious of a popular leader and/or demagogue in the office of the presidency, since such a person might rely on tyrannical means of governing.<sup>23</sup> By fulfilling popular functions and serving the nation through mass appeal, the presidency has now greatly deviated from the original constitutional intentions for the office, removing the buffer between citizens and their representatives that the Framers established. The current political culture now demands the president to be a popular leader, with "a duty constantly to defend themselves publicly, to promote policy initiatives nationwide, and to inspire the population."<sup>24</sup> Communications expert Roderick Hart also believes that the rhetorical presidency is a twentieth century creation and a constitutional aberration as the president now uses rhetoric as a "tool of barter rather than a means of informing or challenging a citizenry."<sup>25</sup> In addition, this gives presidents extraconstitutional powers:

All speech is not created equal. The speech of presidents is more powerful than most. This power derives in part from the office of the presidency, but it also derives from the attitudes presidents have toward the speech act itself. Most presidents, certainly most modern presidents, use speech aggressively. The position they hold and the information at their command give them the tremendous advantages of saying a thing first and saying it best.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, other scholars view presidential rhetoric as a positive institutional and constitutional feature, as well as one imagined by the Framers as a necessary element of a properly functioning republic that allows presidents to speak directly to the public.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the institutional and constitutional implications for public leadership, presidents and other political actors must also contend with their public image and how it is portrayed through the news media. From the founding era when newspaper publishers helped to disseminate the Federalist Papers as the 13 colonies debated ratification of the U.S. Constitution, to the present day with the Internet providing millions of

American citizens an opportunity to participate in political discussions in various blogs and other chat rooms, the mass media—and in particular the news media—have always been an important source of information for American citizens about both politicians and the political process. Today, the political environment in the United States is dominated by the mass media, not only in the role it plays in how citizens stay informed of the government's actions but also in how officials govern and politicians campaign for office. The image and communication skills of candidates matter now more than ever before due to the intense public scrutiny during a campaign from the news media, and high-profile government officials like the president, congressional leaders, state governors, and others must do their job knowing that the ever-watchful eye of the news media is ready to report on every step, or misstep, that they make.

Technological advances throughout the years have played an important role in the evolving relationship between media and politics in the United States, and it greatly impacts public leadership strategies. Newer and better means of communicating give politicians more opportunities for public leadership in how they report on the activities of politicians. By all accounts, the United States is a deliberative democracy. The Framers of the U.S. Constitution set up a governing system that encouraged a spirited public debate, and those citizens participating in the debate have increased since the founding era through the enfranchisement of nearly all citizens. The First Amendment seems to guarantee freedom of the press, yet no absolute right exists for the news media to do or say whatever they wish. Nevertheless, the mass media is a dominant and permanent presence within American culture, and the same can be said of the news media within the American political environment. Reporting on the actions of politicians is a mainstay of daily news coverage in the United States. Americans must rely on the news media to tell them what has happened at the White House, on Capitol Hill, at the U.S. Supreme Court, or in state capitols on any given day. As a result, a unique relationship exists between the members of the government and the press, and the two often have competing interests. And, while tremendous similarities exist in the overall public leadership strategies that all politicians must develop, different office holders must also develop unique strategies that are tailored to their specific office.

The president makes news by virtue of being the ideological symbol of American democracy and leadership to both journalists and the public. As a result, the news media has always been among the most influential political actors with which presidents must contend. The relationship is often an adversarial one since the president and news media need each other yet have different goals—the president wants positive coverage about the actions and policies of his administration, but “big” stories for the news media (which

in turn mean higher ratings and circulations) usually come from negative and scandal-oriented stories about the president and/or his administration. Rarely has a president during the modern era not complained about the news media, the White House press corps, and the daily coverage of his administration. The White House press corps first received working space within the White House in 1904 during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt, who actively cultivated a positive relationship with Washington reporters in an attempt to gain favorable coverage for his administration and legislative agenda. The White House Correspondents' Association was formed in 1914, which contributed to the trend of professionalization of reporters within the newspaper industry during the early part of the twentieth century. The White House press corps experienced tremendous growth during the 1930s and 1940s, particularly during the years of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency (1933–1945), as presidential influence over national politics increased under the New Deal programs.<sup>28</sup>

Today, more than approximately 1,700 people hold White House press credentials, and while all are not considered “regulars” on the White House beat, the sheer size of the press corps has necessitated a more formalized daily press briefing than in years past. The emergence of the television age during the 1950s, and its expansive growth during the 1960s and 1970s, greatly contributed to the growth in the size of the White House press corps. Other factors contributing to the increase in number of reporters on the White House beat include the increased importance and size of the federal government and the role it plays in the lives of individuals, which requires reporters from non-Washington media outlets to cover policy making at the national level. Also, the number of foreign correspondents covering the White House has increased in recent decades as other countries have a greater need to understand the impact of American policies in their own countries.<sup>29</sup>

The prominence of the White House beat has also increased within the journalism industry, and is now viewed as one of the premier assignments in most news organizations. In recent years, the reporters who regularly cover the White House include representatives from a variety of media outlets, including the top daily newspapers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*); the big three weekly news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*); the major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CNN, MSNBC); and the major wire services (*Associated Press*, *United Press International*, *Reuters*). The growth in the size of the White House press corps has also contributed to the expansion of both the White House Press Office and Office of Communications, which must handle the increased demands of Washington reporters.

Throughout the twentieth century, prominent reporters who covered the White House beat often played an important role in shaping the image of



presidents in their respective media outlets as well as in the eyes of the American public. Therefore, presidents and their advisors during the modern era have actively developed strategies in an attempt to manage and control the news of their administrations in the national media. A White House communication strategy consists of various components, including the leadership style of the president, presidential rhetoric and speechwriting, presidential public activities, the presidential policy agenda, and the presidential/press relationship. Communication strategies have become an important and permanent part of the everyday operation of the White House. An effective presidential communication strategy can be a critical factor, at least for presidents since the emergence of the television age, in developing and implementing the administration's policy goals.<sup>30</sup>

The president relies on two groups of advisors within the White House in an attempt to control his own public image and that of his administration—the press office and the Office of Communications. The press secretary heads the press office and is responsible for preparing press releases, coordinating news and holding daily press briefings for the White House press corps, and facilitating the needs of reporters who cover the president. The press secretary also serves as an important public spokesperson for the president and as a liaison between reporters and the White House. The Office of Communications develops a long-term public relations strategy, and also coordinates presidential coverage in regional and local media outlets. Advisers usually spread the “line-of-the-day” throughout the administration, which then takes it to the press; the office also takes the White House message directly to the people when necessary. The ultimate goal is to set the public agenda through the use of focus groups, polls, sound bites, and public appearances by the president.

The current political environment with the news media, and in particular television, that presidents must face, which has steadily evolved since Vietnam and Watergate, is one that breeds mistrust, cynicism, and fierce competition among members of the White House press corps and their respective publications and news shows. The president is under constant scrutiny by the press, but must be careful in his criticisms of reporters, who can not only give voice to his opponents but can present the news as unflattering to the president's public image. The president continues to be the most prominent political figure in news coverage, and his actions can dominate day-to-day news coverage. In the post-Watergate years, press coverage of the president and the White House has become more personal, intrusive, and obsessed with scandal. Television coverage of politics, and in particular the presidency, has not only personalized and politicized the functioning of the national government, but the immediacy of television coverage has also accelerated the decision-making process for presidents. The up-close-and-personal look

at our presidents that television now provides through the plethora of public venues has also altered the political environment in which the president must lead. Americans have come to expect that the personal lives of presidents will make news, which has also desensitized the public to the tabloid-style reporting about personal indiscretions. Presidents must now pay close attention to their image as it is portrayed on television, but determining what is good for the president in terms of control over the message may not be the same as substantive information about the political process for the American electorate.<sup>31</sup>

Many scholars argue that the news media in general, and television in particular, has expanded presidential power, which in turn has limited congressional power and altered the system of checks and balances laid out within the framework of the Constitution. The president, as one person, has a much easier time getting the attention of the American public through the news media than a member of Congress, who is just one person out of 535. Not only have studies shown that the president receives much more coverage than Congress or the Supreme Court, but stories about the president will more than likely top the news. The president makes a better media target as a single-headed institution, readily personified, giving the audience a familiar and easily dramatized focal point. Congressional stories, on the other hand, are hard to make personal or dramatic. Most stories focus on individual members, especially if that member is contemplating a run for higher office, or on a specific piece of legislation. Rarely do stories ever focus on Congress as an institution, because with its complex system of committees and subcommittees, it is a difficult story to tell.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike the president, even the most prominent members of Congress are not guaranteed coverage just for what they say or do, unless, of course, a scandal is involved. For example, Representative Mark Foley (R-FL) gained weeks of national notoriety in the news media when he resigned his House seat in September 2006 after he was accused of sending inappropriate e-mail messages to former male congressional pages. Prior to the scandal, Foley's name was not easily recognizable to the American public as a member of Congress; after the scandal, and for all the wrong reasons, he had become a household name. Not surprisingly, senators in general receive more coverage than members of the House, since many represent larger constituencies (from a large state like California or Texas, for example). Also, the nuts-and-bolts policy-making process within Congress is viewed by many viewers and readers as boring. Often, coverage comes when a policy initiative is first introduced (although sometimes this announcement comes from the president), and then again when the process has concluded. Often, the only coverage that occurs during the policy-making process is focused on intra- or interparty fighting over specifics of a bill. In terms of media coverage of policy issues,

the president often fares better than his legislative colleagues on Capitol Hill—he tends to get a lot of attention for introducing his policy ideas, then the issue moves to Congress, where much of the process is ignored by the press, with the exception of political fighting over an issue. Then, when a bill is approved, cameras are almost always on hand to provide coverage of the president signing the bill into law.<sup>33</sup>

While the president is most concerned with coverage in national news outlets, members of Congress usually receive the majority of their individual coverage in their local newspapers or on local radio or television stations. According to congressional scholars Roger H. Davidson and Walter J. Oleszek, "Relations with the press receive careful attention from members," with each member employing anywhere from one to three press aides whose job it is to generate positive news coverage about all that the member has accomplished. Many members also prepare columns to be printed in local newspapers, and both the House of Representatives and the Senate have television studios and satellite links that provide actualities (prepared statements by members) to local news outlets.<sup>34</sup> Just as presidents want citizens to view them as active, productive, and successful leaders, so too do members of Congress, even if on a local as opposed to a national level.

Virtually every issue of significance in American society eventually gets discussed by the justices on the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet, despite the Court's role in national policy making, which at times has been extensive, it remains the most secretive and tradition-bound institution in American government.<sup>35</sup> Its members and their decision-making process are guarded from both the press and the public. Not surprisingly, this contributes to the inadequate news coverage of the Court as the institutional nature of both the media and the Court often prevents effective reporting. The increasing speed by which journalists must prepare and present the news does not fit well with the traditions of the Court, which has been slow to enter the media age of sound bites and news briefs. The small amount of coverage on the Court, in part, is due to the lack of open participation in the political process by justices, and the difficulty faced by reporters in covering the Court. While the Court has expanded its Public Information Office, provides a small press room, and eventually abandoned "Decision Monday" to spread out the announcements throughout the week, reporters are still bombarded with many key decisions during the last few weeks of the term. Most reporters do not have legal training and find it difficult to thoroughly analyze the decisions within their deadlines.<sup>36</sup>

Judges, and in particular Supreme Court justices, seem to need the mass media the least of any political actors. As a result, they seem to exemplify public leadership in reverse—the lack of communication strategies and resulting news coverage seems to contribute to the public respect for the

judicial branch in general and the Supreme Court in particular. With the exception of a nomination to the Court that stirs up some controversy (such as that of Clarence Thomas in 1991), justices as individuals rarely make news. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that cameras are never allowed in the Supreme Court, and without pictures the Court is less likely to receive coverage in today's image-driven news environment. In addition, the justices do not need the news media to govern from center stage like the president or party leaders within Congress. Justices rarely give interviews, and because they are appointed to the bench for life, they need not worry about their public image for reelection. The Supreme Court, then, is the only federal branch that seems almost entirely immune from the pressures of the television age of politics. Many news organizations, including the *New York Times*, have argued in recent years that cameras should be allowed in the Court, so citizens can view this important part of the governmental process. Suggestions include a C-SPAN-type system of covering proceedings without commentary, but no progress has been made on this issue to date.<sup>37</sup> However, some fear that providing cameras in the Supreme Court will encourage justices to develop a communication strategy, which could in turn tarnish the image of the Court as being above politics.

Cabinet secretaries and other high-ranking executive branch officials must compete with the president and high-profile members of Congress to have a public voice in important policy debates, and news media coverage helps this to occur. Each executive branch department or agency has its own public information office and/or a public affairs/press secretary. As individuals, cabinet secretaries or department heads may have much less of a need for a public leadership strategy than their boss, the president, but some may have higher political aspirations (a run for public office or a more prestigious political appointment) that necessitate effective communication skills when necessary. According to media scholar David L. Paletz, bureaucrats cannot deny their need for news media, since favorable coverage allows them to "acquire, sustain, or reinforce the legitimacy of their department or agency with the other institutions of government and the public; achieve adequate, even increased, funding for their activities; facilitate their policy goals; and encourage acquiescence to their decisions."<sup>38</sup>

On the state and local levels, governors, state legislators, mayors, and even city councils must contend with how they are portrayed in local press outlets. Governors often develop similar public leadership strategies to that of the president, only on a state as opposed to a national level, with the capitol press corps as opposed to the White House press corps following their every move. Governors in large states (like California, New York, Texas, or Florida) and mayors of large cities (such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, or Houston, just to name a few) often have more of a need for press aides and a

communication strategy due to the simple fact that they must govern in the nation's major media markets where there are more media outlets. Elected or appointed officials at the state and local levels seek positive media coverage for the same reasons as their counterparts at the national level—support and resources for their policies and potential candidacies for higher office. According to media scholar Doris Graber, "[State and local] news sets the agenda for public policies. It helps or hinders politicians in achieving their goals. It influences the election and appointment of public officials. It informs the public and officialdom about political affairs and politicians' wrongdoing."<sup>39</sup> In sum, no politician at any level of government seems immune from worrying about his or her public image or how he or she may be judged in terms of his or her public leadership effectiveness.

### MEMORABLE EXAMPLES OF PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Numerous examples exist of American politicians demonstrating effective public leadership. Some, however, seem to stand out more than others and have created a lasting image in the minds of American citizens. While few politicians are ever labeled as great communicators or effective public leaders, those who have earned that distinction set a high standard for their successors, as the following examples illustrate.

President Franklin Roosevelt was known as a skilled communicator and his Fireside Chats set a new standard for presidents to effectively communicate and to establish a direct link with American citizens on important national and international issues. Roosevelt delivered the first of his 30 Fireside Chats at the end of his first week in the Oval Office in March 1933, and the speech allowed Roosevelt to reassure the American public that he would guide the economy from a depression into a recovery. He began the first radio address by saying, "I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking," and continued for 20 minutes explaining in layman's terms what Americans could do to assist in the recovery. This began an effective trend that the President would rely on throughout his tenure in office—the use of radio to enter the living rooms of Americans to talk, in simple terms that were easily understood, about the problems and challenges facing the country.<sup>40</sup> While Roosevelt was also successful in his mastery of the press, skillfully managing news out of the White House through his frequent press conferences in the Oval Office, radio was his "most important link with the people." Roosevelt's warm voice and public speaking skills provided a natural format for the President, and he enjoyed these opportunities to chat with Americans. Roosevelt connected with the American public through radio: "Read in cold newspaper print the next day, these talks seemed somewhat stilted and banal. Heard in the parlor, they were fresh, intimate, direct,

moving. The radio chats were effective largely because Roosevelt threw himself into the role of a father talking with his great family."<sup>41</sup>

While president for only three years (1961–1963), John F. Kennedy's brief tenure in the White House would focus on imagery, rhetoric, and utilizing the emerging power of television to capture and deliver the youthful energy of the President and his administration to the American public. Through his public addresses, Kennedy talked of a "New Frontier" and motivated many Americans to become active in public service. One of, if not the, most memorable addresses that Kennedy ever delivered came on October 22, 1962, to discuss the Cuban Missile Crisis with American citizens. This historic 17-minute address, aired live on both television and radio, warned Americans of the possibility of nuclear war, and detailed both the plan to quarantine Soviet ships traveling into Cuba and his ultimatum to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to remove Soviet nuclear missiles stationed in Cuba. Prior to this international crisis, Kennedy had often been accused of being "soft" on communism, but this address left little doubt that he and his administration would respond swiftly and harshly if the nation's security or that of any of its allies was threatened. Considered by many political observers to be young and inexperienced when he first took office, this particular moment of public leadership displayed Kennedy's growing self-confidence as president, particularly in dealing with foreign affairs, and left a lasting impression to American citizens and other leaders around the globe of a confident and capable president in the face of a crisis.<sup>42</sup>

In the era of modern presidents, Ronald Reagan was perhaps the most successful at controlling his image through the mass media, earning himself the nickname the "Great Communicator," and his administration the "Teflon" presidency. Reagan saw the bully pulpit as one of the president's most important tools, and relying on his skills as an actor provided a strong image of moral leadership that restored Americans' faith in government institutions. Imagery and symbolism also played a vital role in the communication strategy during the Reagan years. In addition to the major networks, radio, and the traditional print press, Reagan would find even more media outlets, aided by expanding technology such as cable television, with which to speak to the American public. However, the communication style of the Reagan presidency was tightly scripted and controlled. Nonetheless, Reagan often enjoyed favorable press coverage, and left office with high approval ratings despite the Iran-Contra scandal during his second term.<sup>43</sup> While Reagan enjoyed many public successes, particularly in his public addresses, perhaps the most quoted public statement that Reagan ever uttered came on June 12, 1987, in an address at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin, Germany, next to the Berlin Wall, when he offered a challenge to his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, to "tear down this wall." From the start of his presidency,

Reagan had relied on tough rhetoric towards the Soviet Union (which he called "the evil empire") to push for an end to the Cold War. The 1987 address, given on the west side of the Berlin Wall while citizens of communist-East Germany listened on the other side of the wall, solidified Reagan's desired image of a statesman who devoted much of his presidency to ending communism.

While these three presidents certainly set the standard for public leadership and effective use of the bully pulpit, relying on soaring rhetoric and their ability to connect with the American public, other notable examples of public leadership come from much different circumstances. Bill Clinton, for example, is often credited with excellent political instincts and communication skills, on which he often relied for political survival. Throughout his two-term presidency, instead of using his strong communication skills to educate and lead the public on issues that mattered, Clinton was most often forced to defend himself against not only a Republican agenda but also against political attacks for his personal misdeeds. Clinton's skills as an orator, and his ability to speak in an extemporaneous and empathetic manner, aided his leadership on some, if not all, of his legislative priorities, like affirmative action and education, yet the early assessment of his legacy suggests that Clinton missed many opportunities while in office to enact major policy changes (what Burns would call his opportunities for transformational leadership).<sup>44</sup>

Presidents are not the only politicians capable of demonstrating effective public leadership. In 1994, the Republican Party set out to win a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time since 1954. Led by Newt Gingrich, a representative from Georgia, Republicans developed an effective public relations strategy to attract voter support—tie congressional Democrats to the sinking approval ratings of their president, Bill Clinton, and present voters with a better option and a clear plan for change. That plan was known as the Contract with America, and it helped secure the Republican victory to take control of Congress. The Contract was a plan of action relying in part on passages from Ronald Reagan's 1985 State of the Union Address in which the President talked of an "American Revolution" that could be achieved through government reform. Seen as a revolutionary political idea by many, the Contract presented the strength of the newly emerging conservative Republican majority in Congress. As a political strategy, it was also the first time that a congressional election had been run on mostly a national level, as opposed to individual districts. Gingrich became one of the most prominent Republican voices in 1994, and once the Republican majority was secured in Congress, he rode the political victory to become Speaker of the House of Representatives. While viewed as an enormous public relations success that portrayed Gingrich as an innovative leader, Republicans were only

partially successful in enacting the provisions of the Contract over the next several years.

A final example comes from outside the Washington Beltway, as national tragedy catapulted a big city mayor into the national political spotlight as a rising star within his political party. While many images of heroism and leadership still resonate from the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the days that followed, no one perhaps shaped his public image more than New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. At the end of his second term as mayor of the largest city in America, the moderate-to-liberal Republican who had been elected in a city dominated by Democratic voters earned high marks for his leadership skills, public and otherwise, as he responded to the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in the heart of his city. Giuliani showed proactive and determined leadership as the nation watched the recovery process within New York City; his actions received accolades from many places, including the Ronald Reagan Presidential Freedom Award (presented to him by former first lady Nancy Reagan), being knighted by the Queen of England, and named Person of the Year by *Time* magazine at the end of 2001. He then wrote a number one best seller in 2002, simply titled *Leadership*, and relying on that public success and name recognition, declared his candidacy for the presidency in 2007 by touting his executive and leadership experience as mayor.<sup>45</sup> While his critics point out that he both overstated and overplayed his leadership experience as mayor, Giuliani nonetheless provides the penultimate example of how a public image as a successful leader can translate into greater political opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter illustrates, public leadership is a permanent part of governing for public officials at all levels of government. However, a command of public leadership is tenuous at best; even great public speakers can have public relations disasters, but their strong communication skills and ability to connect with citizens often makes political survival easier to navigate. Key public moments invariably present themselves for presidents as well as other politicians, and how each individual responds and performs in public situations often defines much about someone's true political leadership ability. Unfortunately, for many political leaders, the dominance of mass media in the current political environment has lent itself to a trend in the past two decades to more often highlight negatives or shortcomings about leaders as opposed to their positive attributes or success in office. In addition, the increasing public demands of political offices from the presidency on down, is often at odds with a deliberative democracy and can keep office holders from playing a key role in leading the public to be more informed about



important policy issues. Even at the state and local levels, style often seems to matter more than substance in how public officials communicate with their respective constituents. The current media environment also encourages negative news about politicians and the governing process, which alienates many citizens from wanting to take part in the deliberations. As political scientist Thomas Patterson has pointed out, the shift of a descriptive reporting style in recent decades to one that is more interpretive (which gives journalists, and not the political actors being covered, more control over the content of news) has contributed to the public's dissatisfaction with our leaders and institutions, thereby making effective governance more difficult to achieve.<sup>46</sup>

In the final analysis, why is public leadership important? By all accounts, at least theoretically, we *do* live in a deliberative democracy. The Framers certainly set up a constitutional system at the federal level that encouraged a spirited public debate, and that standard exists at the state and local levels as well. Presidents carry the largest political burden in this regard. Through the unique access that a president has to the bully pulpit, as well as the status as the only elected government official (along with the vice president) who represents all of the people, he has a special responsibility to lead a good portion of the public debate. What a president says publicly is so important in determining how the press will portray a president's actions and policy directives that presidential rhetoric tends to define much of our political reality.<sup>47</sup> There is hardly a moment when a president is not commanding attention on the national or international stage, and with so much attention paid to a president's public leadership style, the president has virtually no room for rhetorical error and he poses a strategic risk for himself each time he appears in public. Yet, there seems to be no hope of reversing the increased expectation for presidents to continue to govern through a strategy that includes public leadership as a major component.

The irony for today's politicians can be found in the fact that while the role of television and the 24-hour news cycle has certainly altered our view of political leadership in that we tend to expect more in terms of performance and entertainment, Americans seem to be losing their patience year after year to listen to a substantive message that informs and educates them about important policy issues. The oversaturation of the mass media within our culture has shortened the American attention span, which is not good news for the political process or for the notion of a deliberative democracy. Returning to the example in the opening of the chapter regarding Arnold Schwarzenegger, it is the more dramatic coverage of a natural disaster that earned him perhaps his best reviews ever as governor, yet the most important feature of his job—the day-to-day policy making in Sacramento—does not draw nearly the attention of the press or California residents. *Public* leadership may determine a disproportionate amount of what is then translated into successful

*political* leadership, but right or wrong, there seems to be no end in sight for the dominance of public criteria in assessing our political leaders.

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